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ABSTRACT

A study examining the perceptions of college students in beginning foreign language classes toward various teaching discovered a discrepancy between the value students and teachers ascribe to communicative language teaching. The study was conducted at the University of South Carolina, in two classes where a variety of teaching techniques were used. At the end of the semester, students were surveyed on their use of language learning strategies, background as learners, and the value and difficulty of the classroom and homework activities. Thirty-one students (out of 40) completed the questionnaire. Results show that the five activities found to be most valuable to students were (1) correction of pronunciation; (2) oral correction of grammar; (3) pronunciation practice in class; (4) oral grammar practice in sentences; and (5) memorizing vocabulary. Dialogue memorization was the least favored activity. Activities having a communicative or process orientation were not highly valued. As a followup, the questionnaire was administered to beginning and intermediate students in South Carolina and California, English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students at all levels in a binational center in Uruguay, and ESL students in an intensive English program in South Carolina. Results were similar, with the intensive language learners' responses diverging the most. Implications for language teaching are discussed. (MSE)

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Resistance to Learning?

Student Reaction to Communicative Language Teaching

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Introduction. While examining the perceptions of college students in beginning level foreign language classes toward various teaching practices we discovered a discrepancy between the value teachers and students ascribe to communicative language teaching. In this paper we will present our study and its findings and discuss some implications for language teaching and learning.

Background. The 1970s and 80s have seen a dramatic shift in the focus of the language teaching paradigm away from primary attention to what was being taught, the content (which up until now has meant structural content), toward how teaching and learning takes place. The role of the teacher has come to be seen as that of facilitator rather than central "knower" and director of classroom activities. Curran's (1976) Community Language Learning or Counseling Learning approach to language teaching is the clearest example of a teacher in the role of facilitator. Though this approach is not widely used in classroom settings, the idea of teacher as facilitator and student as bearer of responsibility for learning is part of the enlightened eclectic approaches now used by many language teachers.

In linguistics and language teaching our understanding of what language is and what it can be used for has broadened so that linguistic competence (control over the sounds, words, and forms of a language) is only a part of the broader communicative competence users of a language possess. Hymes' introduction of the concept of communicative competence in 1972 took into account those aspects of sociolinguistics, discourse, and pragmatics which, along with grammatical

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competence, make up the total picture of what language is and how it is used for interaction. The use of language in meaningful discourse involves who says what to whom how, why, when, and where (Yalden 1987:48). In the grammar based approaches to language teaching, now referred to as "traditional" approaches in current methods texts (cf. Omaggio 1986:41-69; Richard-Amato 1988:9-18), the focus was almost exclusively on the how of communication--sounds vocabulary, and linguistic forms. Now language teachers must be concerned with all the other aspects, too, as well as taking into account the acquisition process of the learner and the role affective variables play in it. In the acquisition process much attention has been given to the "natural" acquisition of the first language and ways in which that process may resemble the acquisition of the second language with a consequent restructuring of ideas about the psychology of language learning along more cognitive than behavioristic lines.

Work begun in 1973 by Trim (1980), Van Ek (1980), and others for the Council of Europe concerning the "threshold level" of English stressed the importance of a needs analysis in determining what students must learn about the target language in order to be able to use it effectively for their own communicative purposes--when, where, and how will they be speaking with whom about what? Discussion of what communication is and how students can be helped to acquire the target language in such a way as to enable them to communicate in it takes primary place in current language methods texts and language teaching journals. Subsumed under these discussions are a number of concerns about what acquisition of the target language requires, the adequacy of the classroom environment for language acquisition and how the best "acquisition rich" environment can be created.

Another result of the focus on communication in language has been the increased attention to process rather than product in language skills like reading and writing.

Of course, there are many language classes still being taught in traditional ways with more emphasis on practice with language forms than on communicating in the language, and our research indicates that most educated adult language learners still possess somewhat traditional attitudes toward what it means to study and to be taught a language and to have certain expectations about what a language class will be like and what sorts of language learning activities will be useful to them. While some studies have been done concerning learners' attitudes toward the target language and the people who speak it (Gardner and Lambert 1972; Saville-Troike 1976; Moskowitz 1981), little has been done to determine the students' perspective on what teaching practices are most valuable for them in learning the target language. This seems an important question to address given that adult learners are much more likely to give attention to and thereby profit from learning experiences which they see as relevant and valuable. Our work in this area indicates that adult language students currently ascribe less value to communicative teaching strategies than do language teachers and researchers.

The Initial Study. Our research began in 1985 when we became participant-observers in two beginning level foreign language classes at the University of South Carolina for a semester. The classes were taught by excellent teachers drawing on a variety of teaching techniques. At the end of the term, we used our field notes from the class observations to create a language learning questionnaire for our fellow classmates asking about their use of language learning strategies, their background as learners and finally their judgments as to the value and the difficulty

of the various classroom and homework activities we had done during the semester. Our original questionnaire listed eighteen activities which students were asked to rate on a scale of 1-4 with 1 being "very valuable," 2 being "somewhat valuable," 3 being "not that valuable," and 4 being "useless." Students were asked to mark those activities not done in class with an x.

There were a total of forty students in the two classes, and we got thirty-one completed questionnaires from them. The sample was small, but the results were intriguing. The five activities most valued by the students were among those which are currently least recommended as good teaching strategies. The students' preferred activities and the "field's" problems with them are as follows:

> The two most valued activities were having the teacher correct my pronunciation and having the teacher correct my grammar orally. (Both of these are teacher-centered with a focus on correction.) Number 3 in value was practicing pronunciation in class. (This is, again, teacher-centered and not embedded in communicative context.) The students ranked practicing grammar orally in sentences fourth in value. (This has the flavor of drills and habit formation with focus on form rather than meaning.) Memorizing vocabulary ranked number 5. (This relies on memorization rather than building up automatic processing, and it's non-contextualized.)

Memorization of dialogs, which at least has the positive aspect of contextualization, was the activity students least valued.

Four activities in the list of eighteen had some communicative and/or process orientation, but they were not highly valued by the students: answering questions about ourselves (a favorite meaningful/communicative activity among teacher) was

rated 7; improvising dialogs (a kind of "hallmark" of communicative teaching), 10; discovering grammatical rules on the basis of data, 12; and guessing the meaning of the reading text from context was a low 17.

We were interested to see in these results that the beginning level students had a marked preference for teacher-centered activities and a much lower regard for communicative or process-oriented ones (which also tended to be more student-centered). We wondered how widespread these sentiments were among adult learners and whether or not they changed at all as the students' proficiency in the target language increased. We hypothesized that greater proficiency would result in learners' having greater appreciation for student-centered, communicative work. We also wondered whether successful students and unsuccessful students (with success measured by expected class grade) would value the same activities.[1]

Procedures. As a follow-up to our initial study, we distributed a thousand questionnaires to be completed by students at the end of the semester to the following groups: beginning and intermediate level foreign language students on two campuses in South Carolina and one in California; beginning, intermediate and advanced level students of English as a foreign language at the binational center in Montevideo, Uruguay; and beginning, intermediate, and advanced ESL students in an intensive English program in South Carolina.[2] We are still receiving completed questionnaires from these various groups; the analysis for this paper is based on a corpus of 345 questionnaires: 239 at the beginning level, 85 at the intermediate

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[1] In our original study we found that students were very accurate in predicting their final grade, so we used expected grade as a measure of success in this study.

[2] The beginning level ESL students who responded to the questionnaire were all hispanic and were provided a Spanish translation so that their lack of proficiency would not interfere.

and 21 at the advanced. Ninety of the respondents were enrolled in intensive programs and 255 in traditional foreign language classes.

Findings. Students at all levels, both successful and unsuccessful, are quite consistent in their choice of most valued activities. The ranking of the top six activities varies a bit, but they almost unanimously choose the same six activities as being the most valuable. The ratings for the entire sample results in this ranking of the most valued activities overall:

1--memorizing vocabulary	1.25
2--listening to explanations of grammar	1.28
3--having the teacher correct my pronunciation	1.29
4--having the teacher correct my grammar orally	1.33
5--practicing pronunciation in class	1.36
6--practicing grammar orally in sentences	1.40

The responses from intensive ESL students diverge significantly those of the traditional foreign language learners. First of all, they engaged in several more sophisticated activities which were added to the questionnaire to reflect the wider range of tasks asked of students in the intensive program. These included class discussion in the target language, writing compositions, giving speeches, and reading articles. These activities received generally favorable rankings from students in the intensive program and followed teacher correction of grammar. However, of the original eighteen activities, the fifth highest ranking from this group was a tie between guessing the meaning of reading texts from context and improvising dialogs. This result seemed consistent with our intuition that language learners with greater proficiency in the target language have greater appreciation for communicative,

process-oriented activities since most of these students were beyond the very beginning levels. Indeed, among the advanced students of our sample, discovering grammar rules did rank in the top five. However, the number of advanced students is rather small, and these findings will be reexamined as we include more data from such students.

We also thought that the students' success in language learning might affect the value they placed on activities, but there was little indication of such an effect. The only marked difference between the activities successful and less successful students find valuable is related to work in the language laboratory. First, students expecting a grade of D or F for the course ranked listening to tapes 5 while other students gave listening to tapes a fairly low ranking of 14. Second, students expecting to receive a grade of C in the course valued writing lab/workbook exercises, ranking it third, and students expecting a D or F ranked this activity 6. Students expecting As or Bs ranked writing lab/workbook exercises 12.

Since beginning students make up the overwhelming majority of this corpus, their value ratings are almost identical to those for the entire group. We expected, on the basis of our original study, to find that beginning students would show a marked preference for teacher-centered activities. That did, in fact, turn out to be the case in our larger corpus. Advanced and intermediate students diverged from the beginners in only two respects: intermediate students valued homework exercises more than other groups, and advanced students valued discovering grammatical rules from patterns in the language more than other groups did. What is more important than these differences, however, is the pattern of consistently high value accorded to the same six activities and the reliance on teacher-centered,

non-communicative, traditional activities across all levels and types of students.

Implications and Speculations. These findings raise some troublesome questions especially for those of us who wish to teach within the communicative context. The indication is clear here that activities we have come to value greatly are not highly valued by our students. Why is this so and what kind of response is in order?

The first point to consider by way of explanation is the intuitive judgment mentioned earlier, which almost any language teacher could make without such a study as ours, that educated adult language learners expect certain things of language classes. Their expectations could be based on experiences with language classes in secondary school where they have quite likely been taught in a traditional way. As the teaching of languages in secondary schools becomes more communicative, the experiences of students in language classes may result in changed expectations about what language teaching involves. But in this transitional period, language teaching may be more effective if teachers explain at the beginning a bit about the reasoning behind any parts of their methodology that vary from student expectation. Asher (1977) saw a need for explaining to adult learners in their native language the purpose and goals of his Total Physical Response approach to language teaching before beginning a lesson in the target language in which they'd be asked to move around silently in response to the teacher's commands--behavior quite different from the expected language class routine. It's interesting to note in classroom observations that many teachers of beginning level students employ at least some aspects of TPR in at least some classes, but few of them explain in advance to the learners what is about to take

place and why they think the activity is an important one.

Another possible explanation for these value judgments is that they are tied in some way to what is actually going on in the classroom. It is probably significant that in our list of eighteen class and homework activities only four are communicative and/or process-oriented. This seems to indicate that at least in the two classes where we did our initial research, much more attention was given to non-communicative work in class than to communicative. It has often been observed that students concentrate on (and perhaps value more) the activities and/or information which the teacher stresses and/or tests. While language teachers may have an increasingly keen interest in communicative teaching and may employ communicative activities to various degrees in their classes, the framework may often still be quite traditional. Our future plans include administering the questionnaire to groups which are taught predominantly in communicative framework--a rarity in most foreign language classrooms, in spite of all the efforts made in this direction.

There is also reason to wonder when teachers use only parts of the communicative approach whether or not students are adequately prepared for the tasks they are asked to do. For example, in our survey beginning level students didn't value improvising dialogs as much as the advanced level ESL students did. One explanation for this could be that the beginners were asked to form dialogs for which they lacked the necessary language skills. The communicative demands we make of students must be consistent with their ability to perform. We may challenge them by asking for one step above their current level of performance, but asking them for more than that results in breakdown of language production and

frustration.[3]

Another possibility is that students have to be "coached" in new forms of classroom interaction before they find them valuable and comfortable. We know that students who are accustomed to lecture formats usually need time to adjust to seminar-style discussions. In language teaching it is also likely that new behaviors will take time to become "natural." Four of the activities the beginners value most are teacher-centered. They seem a bit passive in the beginning stage of language acquisition--a natural response which is anticipated in the work of those who advocate an initial silent period to allow learners the opportunity to form a cognitive map of the target language (cf. Winitz et al).

Next, we must ask why it is that students value these six activities most. For beginning students, what could be more logical? They are attempting to establish a framework for the target language? They have to get the parts in place one way or another. Our concern as teachers needs to focus on the most effective ways of facilitating the setting up of such a framework. It is quite likely that some learners will respond more positively to an explicit, structural presentation while others will profit more from discovering structure in the data. Our teaching must allow for both possibilities. In any case, a strong argument can be made for the chunking of input which occurs in context-embedded environments. Our language classrooms tend to be lacking in situational communicative context (Cummings 1981), and this is a special difficulty for the beginning level learner who is of necessity operating with concrete language about a limited number of "survival" kinds of topics such as numbers, weather, family and food. An obvious way to

[3]See ACTFL Guidelines for this notion of successive levels of difficulty.

facilitate communicative competence in the target language from the beginning is to provide learners with a highly contextualized environment so that language forms can be encountered in communicative contexts.

Conclusions. The results of our study indicate that we cannot assume that our adult language students have the same attitudes we do about language teaching and learning. The impact of this potential discrepancy in attitudes for language teaching effectiveness needs much more exploration. We need to know more about the ways in which students' attitudes toward the value of teaching activities affect their language acquisition. We need to know something about the effectiveness of discussing language teaching goals with students (keeping in mind that this is only a possibility with beginning level students when the teacher is able to use their native language). Perhaps for now it is most important that we be aware of what students value in terms of language teaching and consider ways to be responsive to their felt needs within the framework we espouse.

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